

“Confidence in Prayer” (An Exposition of 1 John 5:14-15)¹

Introduction

We looked at the previous verse (v.13) a few weeks ago, and saw there that John tells us the primary purpose and theme of this letter. His aim throughout is that we who have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation might **'know that we have eternal life.'** In other words, this letter is primarily about *assurance of salvation*.

Now here as we turn to v.14-15 John addresses a subject that is very closely-related to assurance, and is really a *corollary* to it – *confidence or boldness in approaching our God and heavenly Father in prayer.*

Prayer may seem *simple*, but in some ways it can be *one of the most difficult and perplexing things in the Christian life.* After all, *what is prayer?* Simple, right? You could say that it is simply *talking to God.* The *Shorter Catechism* (Q/A 98) defines prayer “an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”

But Christians often struggle with prayer, don't we? *Why is that?* There are many reasons that can be offered to explain this *sad fact.* *Sometimes we are simply too prideful or self-confident to pray.* We think of prayer as a *last resort* because we think that we can handle most things just fine on our own. There is a famous movie line uttered by Clint Eastwood - “A man's got to know his limitations.” If we knew our own limitations, we would pray more.

Sometimes we think that we are too busy to pray. We see our ever-growing to-do list and tell ourselves that we just have far too much to do to stop and spend time in prayer. Contrary to this idea, the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, reportedly once said, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” Sometimes we are really too busy to *not* pray (even if it may not be for three hours).

Sometimes our sins keep us from prayer. It has been said that *either prayer will keep us from sin, or sin will keep us from prayer.* It is not without reason that our Lord Jesus teaches us, **“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”** (Matthew 26:41) And in Psalm 32:3–5, David himself says,

**“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah
I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah”**

No wonder the Lord's prayer teaches us to confess our sins to God and ask Him to **“forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”** (Matthew 6:12)

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

And sometimes a lack of assurance keeps us from prayer. Assurance of salvation and boldness in prayer are very closely-related, aren't they? In fact, the word that John uses here for “confidence” can also be translated as “boldness” or even “assurance.”

If we lack assurance of our having eternal life through faith in Christ, we cannot help but lack confidence in God's willingness to hear and answer our prayers. And so in this way assurance is a very practical matter, isn't it? If we would be people of prayer, we must then also be people who know that we have eternal life – people who have a settled assurance of our salvation in Christ.

In fact, this seems to be the flow of thought in what the Apostle John writes here. John Stott puts it this way: “In verses 14–17 John moves to a second *confidence* enjoyed by the believing Christian, not now of eternal life, but of answered prayer.”² The first confidence he refers to there is that of eternal life; the second (which follows closely upon the first) is that of answered prayer.

Stott goes on to say:

“Christian confidence belongs not just to the future, to the parousia (2:28) and the judgment day (4:17), but to the here and now. It describes both the manner of our approach to God, free and bold (3:21), and our expectation of its outcome, namely *that ... he hears us.*”³

And so with that in mind, let us briefly look at what John tells us here in our text about the Christian's confidence toward God in prayer.

Faith in Christ and Confidence in Prayer

The *first* thing that we must be clear about regarding confidence in prayer may seem so abundantly obvious that we might not even think that it needs to be said, and that is in order to have a right confidence in approaching God in prayer, *you must first and foremost be a Christian.* That is, you *must* be a believer in Christ.

Why do I say that? This is the very foundation of both assurance and of confidence toward God in prayer that John himself laid down for us in the previous verse. In v.13 John told us that he was writing all of these things “**to you who believe in the name of the Son of God.**” And so John is primarily writing to *believers.* And that cannot be overstated.

On our own, outside of Jesus Christ, we are all in a state of sin and condemnation, and the wrath of God for our sins abides upon us. *And so on our own, outside of Jesus Christ, we literally have no right to pray and make requests of God.* We have no right to approach or worship God on our own.

And so faith in Jesus Christ and having eternal life in Him must come first. We must be reconciled to God through the death of His Son before we can come boldly to the throne of grace. Outside of Christ the throne of God is a throne of *judgment*, not a throne of *grace*. *Are you a believer in Jesus Christ?* If not, any confidence in prayer that you may have is nothing but *presumption*. Confidence in approaching God in prayer is for all believers, but believers only.

² *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p.184.

³ Ibid

The first prayer that a sinner must pray and may have confidence in being heard is a prayer for mercy and forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. It is to ask, as the tax collector did in the parable of our Lord in Luke's Gospel, "**God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**" (Luke 18:13)

Then and only then, having been reconciled to God through His Son, you may rightly have confidence in approaching God in prayer.

Asking According to the Will of God and Confidence in Prayer

The *second* thing that John teaches us about prayer is that in order for us to rightly have confidence or boldness in approaching God in prayer, *we must ask according to the will of God*. This is fundamental to having *a right view of prayer* as well as to having *a right confidence in prayer*.

Prayer is *not* twisting God's arm behind His back in order to get Him to change His mind and give us things that we desire. (That is really the heart of idolatry and false religion.) We could not do that even if we tried! Prayer does *not* change God's will, much less His decree for all things from all eternity.

And isn't that comforting to know! If God always gave us everything that we asked for I would be afraid to pray, for I do not really know what is best. Our will is *not "good and acceptable and perfect"* as the will of God most certainly is (Romans 12:2)!

And so prayer must be asking for things according to God's will. Or do we somehow think that our will is better than God's will, or that we know better than God does as to what is most conducive for His glory and for our good?

We are taught to pray this way in the Lord's prayer. In Matthew 6:10, our Lord Jesus teaches us to pray:

***“Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.”***

Jesus Himself prayed this very way in the garden of Gethsemane. In Matthew 26:39, just prior to His arrest, trial, and crucifixion, it is written:

“And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

And what does John tell us the result will be if we are praying according to the will of God? That God **“hears us.”** (v.14) Of course God knows all things, and so this is *not* a simple statement about the omniscience of God. To say that God *hears* us is a way of saying that He *answers* us.

And so believers in Christ who pray according to the will of God should rightly have boldness or confidence in approaching God in prayer; and this means that we should be confident that our God and heavenly Father will hear and answer us from heaven, giving good gifts to His children who ask!

If that won't get us praying and coming boldly to the throne of grace, nothing will! Isn't that often the reason that we are sometimes hesitant to pray – because we don't believe that God will answer us? And yet how often has God heard and answered us, and done even more than we asked!

Now how can we learn to pray more according to the will of God? First, we always pray, “**Thy will be done.**” Secondly, we must be students of the Word of God, for that is where His “**good and acceptable and perfect**” will is revealed to us.

The better that we understand the mind and will of God as revealed in Scripture, the better equipped we will be to pray according to the will of God in all things, and the more confident we will be in approaching our God and heavenly Father in prayer.

Confidence in God and Confidence in Prayer

One last point as we wrap things up - our confidence is not in *prayer* per se, but rather in *God* who hears and answers prayer! That is why John says, “**And this is the confidence that we have toward him**” (v.14) or “**in him**” (KJV).

Our confidence in approaching God in prayer is *not* to be in *ourselves*, as if we could ever be worthy on our own of being heard by God. Our confidence is *not* even to be primarily in *prayer itself*. You may have seen the bumper stickers that say, “Prayer Changes Things.” You get what they mean, but it isn’t really *prayer itself* that changes anything, but rather the God who graciously hears and answers our prayers who changes things.

Look again at what John says in v.14-15:

“And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”

How confident should we be in our God and heavenly father when we pray? When we pray according to His will, we should pray as if His answer and in giving good gifts to us as His children is as good as done!

Notice that John does *not* say, “And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we *will* have the requests that we have asked of him.” No, he uses the present tense, doesn’t he? He rather says, “**And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.**”

In some ways this is the same point that our Lord Jesus makes in Matthew 7:7–11, when He tells us:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Do we think that we (who are “evil”) are more kind and generous to our own children than God is to His own? Heaven forbid! But then we should never be surprised when God answers our prayers and gives good gifts to us when we pray! *We as believers should ask, seek, and knock, being confident in the goodness and mercy of God toward us as His adopted children in Christ.*

No wonder Hebrews 4:16 exhorts us, “**Let us then with confidence [or boldness] draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**” May the Lord work in us what is pleasing in His sight, that we might become more and more *a people of prayer*, that this church may be *a house of prayer*.

May we learn to *pray*, to pray *according to the will of God*, and to *be confident in God*, that He is truly more willing to hear and answer us than we are to even pray! - Amen